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BALLOT REFORM: NEED OF SIMPLIFICATION

BY RICHARD S. CHILDS

The general subject of this conference is ballot reform. A more accurate title would be Reform of the Methods of Popular Control of Government, and my topic becomes The Need of Simplification of the Method of Popular Control.

The theory of an election, I take it, is somewhat as follows: It is known that on a certain day the people are to select an officer to perform on their behalf certain duties and to hold certain powers. The office is made desirable by reason of the salary and honor and power attached to it. Various aspirants for the place come before the public by one method or another, make known their qualifications for the office, explain the policies which they desire to put into effect through the power attached to that office, and the voters go to the polls on election day and indicate on the ballot which of the aspirants they prefer.

This process constitutes an election as fondly imagined by those who first framed our various constitutions and charters. This idea of an election is perfectly sound and perfectly practical. It has, however, certain distinct limitations based on familiar facts of human nature, and in the United States these limitations have been stupidly overstepped.

The theory of an election, as outlined, presupposes that the voter is to have an opportunity to get some kind of acquaintance with the claims of the various aspirants for the office. If he fails to do this, it is inevitable that his vote will be unintelligent and easily controlled by those who have an interest in the election.

If the voter in a large community is to know the candidates, it is necessary that the latter secure a proper amount of publicity so that each candidate shall become in the mind of the voter a definite mental picture—a picture so definite that the voter will develop a preference based on adequate information. It must be evident that there is a limit to the number of elections which can be held simultaneously without blurring these mental pictures. Any man must

admit, for instance, that it would not be practical to hold 100 real elections on one day. No voter could remember several hundred candidates even if he tried to do so in systematic fashion, and a system which put the names of several hundred candidates for a hundred offices upon the ballot (without the aid of some guide or trademark label) would result in confusion, out of which would emerge as victors, not the candidates who were most successful in getting votes, but those who were least *unsuccessful*. It would be like letting school children vote, and the result would have no significance as an expression of opinion.

The same condition will be true of a ballot which has much less than 100 places to be filled. It will be true, in part at least, at any election where a non-partisan ballot would be impracticable. If you apply this test of leaving off the party labels, you will see by analyzing the resulting bewilderment, to just what extent the people are ruling, and to what extent they are being led by a ring in their nose.

Take the ballot you voted at the last election! Cut it up with a pair of shears and paste it together with the party labels eliminated, so that for the office of county clerk, for instance you will be compelled to choose between Smith and Jones and Robinson. If on looking over this ballot you find that you are lost without the party label to guide you, that your vote for certain offices was without knowledge or intelligence, to that extent you will know *you* have not been exercising control, but have, by a kind of proxy-giving, delegated your share of the control of those offices to someone else. Extend the same examination to the entire electorate and you will see to what extent that ballot has been used as intended, and to what extent it has proven a failure as an instrument of popular control of government.

A voter who votes blindly is being bossed. Very few voters, even the illiterate, vote a ballot *entirely* blindly. Even the Italian street digger probably has certain reasons for supporting A or B for governor; but every American citizen, with the exception of the professional politicians, votes blindly on certain parts of his ballot, and is to that extent being bossed.

The wide acceptance of bossism is commonly denounced as "apathy" or "indifference," and people say "the citizens are asleep and only the politicians are awake." It is an ancient libel. American citizens are as a whole no more naturally apathetic than the citizens of any other democratic nation. If the burghers of Glasgow were

brought in a body to Philadelphia, and compelled to hold a few elections under the present Philadelphia, system, they would get the same kind of government that the Philadelphians are now getting for themselves. And likewise, if the people of Philadelphia were transferred to Glasgow, the government of that city would continue to be one of the best in the world year after year and election after election. Human nature is the same in Philadelphia and Glasgow. The essential difference is only in the size and character of the burden of participation thrown upon the electorate. If you argue differently you must be prepared to prove that the flood changed the human nature of the people of Galveston. The city of Houston advertises that its city hall is run like a business office. Once it was run like a political hang-out. Did the adoption of the commission plan of government suddenly change the character of the people of Houston?

Apathy, indifference, are *relative*, depending entirely upon how much is demanded. Suppose, for instance, there were but one polling place for an entire city, so that the citizens must travel considerable distances on election day in order to cast their votes. Immediately we should confront the phenomenon of a decreased vote—more “apathy” as compared with the present condition, where there is a polling place at every barber shop.

Suppose we put the polling place ten miles out of town on the top of a mountain so that every citizen had to go out and scramble all day to get there—we should have a still smaller vote. Most of the citizens would stay in town and attend to their own business, and the reformers would say in disgust “the citizens are supremely apathetic and indifferent and won’t do their duty.” Yet the people of the town are the same people all the time—no more really apathetic than when the full vote turned out on election day under the other conditions.

That is what I mean by saying that apathy is relative, depending entirely upon how much is required.

We have made our politics even more inaccessible to the people than I have described when I put the polling place on the mountain top. If you and I could, by walking 10 miles and climbing a mountain once a year become effective participants in politics, it is not at all unlikely that we would make the effort. But we have a system of politics so elaborate by reason of the multiplicity of elective offices, that politics has come to be considered a separate profession. That is the very climax of inaccessibility; it removes politics to a distance equivalent to a year’s journey.

Every citizen knows that, reformers to the contrary, little is gained in the effectiveness of the citizen by attendance at caucuses and primaries. A citizen must become so familiar with political workings, so strenuous in his opinions and in his political activity, that he becomes a member of the little conclave that meets previous to the caucuses, to set the tables for the electorate, before he begins to exercise any real control over the business of nomination and election. He can do that only at the serious sacrifice of other business. In consequence, the men who become and remain effective politicians are either men who find in politics satisfactory remuneration, or else the leisure class including millionaires and tramps.

The hope of America does not lie with any such class as this, but rather with the men whose time is too valuable to permit them to go into politics. When we make politics a profession, we automatically exclude 95 per cent of the voters,—the great unbribable mass of the community. To restore control to 100 per cent of the people, to secure democracy in place of government-by-politicians, we must so simplify politics that it will no longer constitute a separate profession; we must simplify it until a busy man can, in his scanty spare time, become sufficiently versed in its mysteries to become effective. We must make politics accessible to the great bulk of our citizens.

To simplify politics means that we must strive to approach our ideal of an election, where the candidates come forward, get a full hearing and each voter selects his favorite and has a reason.

One test of practicability is the need for a "ticket" or a "label" to guide the voter; and when we call for the selection of 10, 20 or 30 officials on one day, we find that the people begin to vote by tickets, by party labels instead of by men, giving themselves over blindly to the guidance of politicians.

But it is certainly possible to elect one man on one day in ideal fashion. Experience has demonstrated that beyond a doubt. The experience of certain western cities that are governed by commissions of five elected on a non-partisan ballot shows that the average citizen can manage to select five separate favorite candidates without the aid of a ticket. Whether the exact limit is five or six or seven, is of course a matter that cannot be exactly demonstrated. But tickets have been used at times in some of those cities, showing that five is at least near the border line.

Accessibility thus attained is not enough, however; the people will not inevitably participate even if they can. Having led our

horse to water we must get him to drink. For instance, suppose we elected a county clerk and no one else at a given election. There is an ideally short ballot—just a single place to be filled—a perfectly “accessible” bit of politics. Yet the ballot on that occasion would fail to gather the judgment of the people just as surely as if the county clerk were lost in a crowd of other minor officials at the bottom of a long ballot. The people with a few exceptions would not go to the polls or pay any attention to the matter, for the share of each voter in the matter of the county clerkship is too insignificant to deserve attention. The electorate shrugs its big shoulders and flatly declines to be bothered.

So we face the problem of devising a system in which the people not only *can* participate but *will* participate. The importance of the election must reach the consciousness of every voter. The way to bring this about is not by exhortation and prayer, but by giving real importance to the position that is to be filled so as to make it naturally conspicuous. For instance—the office of state assemblyman in New York is among the neglected positions. In actual practice this is now an appointive position—appointive by some self-established and irresponsible coterie of local politicians. Even in the off-years when the assemblyman is sometimes the only place on the ballot, experience shows that the people do not take control. The place cannot of course be made appointive by any other elective officer. The proper alternative is to increase the importance of the office. At present the assemblyman is a mere one-one-hundred-and-fiftieth of one-half of a legislature, whose actions are closely circumscribed by the constitution and subject to the veto of the governor. Suppose that, following the experience of the cities, we substitute one chamber for the present bi-cameral system, and triple the size of the districts. Each assemblyman would then be six times as important and, with his increased capacity for good or ill, would attract more criticism, more popular examination. If the people still fail to get excited over that office, cut the size of the assembly in half again, thrusting upon twenty-five men the responsibility of all legislation for a great state. And surely then, if not before, the office will reach a pinnacle of light where the whole electorate will see it and feel concerned about it, and where it will be beyond the grasp of the politicians.

And so we have two practical limitations to our ideal of an election.

1. The number of officials to be elected at any one time must be limited to five or less; and

2. The elective offices must be limited to those that are of such importance and character that the people will consent to exert themselves to make the selection themselves.

In building a democracy everything else must be warped to fit these fundamental limitations. For these are the limitations of the people themselves. We cannot wait for human nature to change, we must order our institutions to fit human nature. There is no hope in putting a square collar on our horse and then condemning the horse for failure to grow a square neck. Accordingly, while it may seem desirable to have a state treasurer elected so as to secure independent audit of accounts, we must secure protection in some different way if it is found in practice that the people do not select the state treasurer for themselves.

It may seem desirable in a city, for various reasons, to have a large council elected at large; but that plan with all its advantages must be rejected on account of the supreme and unalterable disadvantage that in practice the real selecting under those conditions is not done by the voters.

No matter how many reasons may be advocated for having all county officials independently elected, those reasons cannot stand against the overwhelming and unalterable disadvantage that those offices make so little appeal to the popular imagination that the public in practice ignores them, and leaves the selection of those officials to be settled, without supervision, by anybody who volunteers. Deplore such wanton carelessness if you will, but the public is too big to be spanked.

The fact that Great Britain, most of Canada and other foreign democracies recognize the inert clumsiness of the electorate and call for only the simplest popular participation is a big enough difference to account for their relative success. It is the acceptance of the same principle that explains the success of the new notion of governing American cities by small boards or "commissions." And until our politics is simplified in deference to the human limitations of the electorate in our States, counties and cities, the American people can never really control their government.

Many a reformer will disagree with this, and cite the effective rush to arms that has been made by the people under present conditions on this or that happy occasion as showing the people can control now if they want to, but there is always the relapse as the reformer himself will confess. On such occasions, an abnormal condition of

public activity has been created, usually through the means of great and costly stimulation. Being abnormal it cannot persist indefinitely and, either through the ceasing of the stimulus or the failure of the old stimulus to stimulate any longer, we have the inevitable reversion to normal conditions.

The need of simplification in our methods of popular control of government is based on nothing less than the necessity for getting something that in actual operation will prove practical.

When we have by sufficient study and experiment along these lines arrived at a point where the electorate votes only for men it knows, we shall have real popular control, real democracy, and government that more accurately responds to public opinion